

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
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UNIVERSITY NEWS OFFICE

(Baccalaureate Address of President
Nathan M. Pusey to the Class of 1960
of Harvard college, given at the
Memorial Church in Harvard Yard on
Sunday afternoon, June 12, 1960.)

Recently I had occasion to scan the report of the acting chairman of the committee which admitted your class to Harvard College. This report spoke very well of you — glowingly of your median mathematical and verbal test scores. For that early time, your scores were very good indeed.

Similarly, you made a strong impression on the Dean of Freshmen. "The Class of 1960, the smallest in a number of years," he wrote, "had a truly distinguished record — in fact, as far as I can tell, the best ever achieved." You had the "highest percentage of men on the Dean's list and lowest percentage in the categories of unsatisfactory records and connections severed. The number of voluntary withdrawals was extremely small." Then he went on to say, "I was frankly surprised at this."

He had expected many of you to drop out because an unusually large number of your class had come in to see him during the year about the possibility of taking a voluntary leave of absence "to think things over." Fortunately for Harvard college during recent years the majority of you decided "to think things over" here. Which in my judgment is as it should be.

I do not know how many of you were aware when you came here that in the spring immediately preceding your entering Harvard, several young men who had been thinking things over here during the preceding four years let loose an especially virulent undergraduate indictment of education in Harvard College. This was a long article published at Commencement four years ago as a special issue of i.e. *The Cambridge Review* under the title "Harvard 1956." Some of you may recall the subsequent excited discussion still going on when you arrived as freshmen in the fall. If so, I hope you did not feel then (nor do now!) that you had made a mistake in your choice of a college.

"Harvard 1956" was a sharp-spoken article. In a curious way its indignation was turned as much against the undergraduates of the college generation immediately preceding yours as against the institutional organization we ordinarily think of as "Harvard." The article attacked the College as self-satisfied and false in aim and Harvard undergraduates as eager to surrender to the institution on its own unworthy terms. It lashed the students because, it said, they were too ready to accept the allegedly false intellectual life the College fosters instead of striding out freshly and creatively on their own. The article charged that, "Harvard does not cultivate a respect for intellect" so much as promote the worst kind of vanity, "the exhibitionistic gratification of prestige." "The University may talk of art and creativity and educating the student," it said, "but by its actions — intense bureaucratic rivalry, encouragement of falsely competitive aims—it betrayed its real interest."

"Harvard 1956" was a vehement protest against this alleged betrayal, of the college it said, "The official policy of 'leaving the students alone' often cloaks administrative incapacity to know what to do about the general lack of good teaching." About the students the article asserted: "The students play professor among themselves. They have no sense of student fellowship and unity, because they are not sole and whole to begin with. They are always busy trying to prove to each other how mature and wise they are, if not simply how knowledgeable. They are terribly distracted from what they really want to do; they bore each other eternally, and smile and laugh to cover the boredom... The young try to destroy each other with the same weapons the adults use to destroy them."

The article was violent and in parts exaggerated. At points it seemed inadequately informed and, as a consequence, simply mistaken. Insofar as it was an indictment of a student generation for lack of feeling it was refuted by its own tone. But in a tolerant view it can be acknowledged that it said a number of things which may have needed saying, and, on the whole, said them well.

At its center the article was a heartfelt plea for candor and sincerity. It admonished everyone at Harvard to turn from posturing to true intellectual concern. It called for the acceptance of feeling as a necessary and honorable capacity in man, and spoke out bitterly against what it called Harvard's "arid intellectualism." This, it said, may be a necessary failing in older people in whom the force of life has ebbed, but it is totally inappropriate in youth. Much of the argument would sound very negative, at least to people of my generation; but there was a positive side. The article was chiefly, in its own view, a plea for attachment and concern. It was a manifesto addressed narrowly, perhaps a bit snobbishly, to those whom it distinguished as "the best students." Its main note was an exhortation to these students to defy their desiccated teachers, take their lives into their own hands, and rise from the status of "could-be intellectuals" to become "real intellectuals."

Undergraduate criticism of Harvard college has not been lacking in your time. In recent months the columns of the Crimson have carried their share. Perhaps some of you have been its authors. A chief charge in this later criticism—again with some justification—has seemed to me to be that

"professionalism" and "excessive specialization" have now gained too great, almost a controlling power in the educational procedures of the college. The consequence has been, the argument continues, that we are no longer genuinely interested in the man of broad general powers on whom the health of the world in any generation so largely depends, but only in the diligent, conscientious honor student, or more narrowly, only in him who early decided to go on to graduate school in order to prepare himself in his turn to become a college professor. The result is, it is claimed, that Harvard is progressively less and less a congenial place for the non-professional to be.

I do not agree with this criticism. At the same time, I rather hope a large number of you will go on to graduate school and that at least some of you will become college teachers. But today instead of undertaking to reply to this or any other recent criticism of education in Harvard College, I should like to advance one of my own.

The famous "red book," *General Education in a Free Society*, comes as close to being the guide we steer by in much of our educational activity as anything we have in print at this time. It calls attention to various areas of knowledge which are properly of concern in college education and distinguishes traits of mind which should result from the experience of college, traits such as the ability "to think effectively, to communicate thought, to make relevant judgments, and to discriminate among values." But then the Report goes on: "The objective of education is not just knowledge of values but commitment to them." Further in the argument, not unlike the crimson, the Report contends that education must look to the whole man, not just to the scholar in him—clearly to a man who believes and feels, and cares, as well as one who knows and discriminates. Later still it states that education's task is to produce the good man, one "who possesses an inner integration, poise, and firmness," gifts for the long run which can come only from "an adequate philosophy of life." We are left with the clear implication that a proper task of collegiate education is to encourage each student to acquire such a philosophy.

That any of you has failed to become possessed of significant knowledge here, I cannot believe. Surely you have met a variety of experience, fields of interest, places, times, people, problems and ideas—a whole range of subjects about which you did not know, or knew very little when you entered here for years ago. Surely you know a good deal about these subjects now. This must be true for both honors and non-honors students. Certainly, too you have all gained strength in those abilities which the "red book" states are special aims of Harvard education—increased capacity for thought, for discrimination and for evaluation. You have also — most of you — been helped forward to the next stage in your careers in or out of the University, though this will not be immediately evident in all cases. And it is to be hoped that as you have gone along, you have found great personal enjoyment in your years in Cambridge. It is a special hope of mine for you that a lively memory of them will remain with you as a valued possession throughout your lives. But the critics agree there is something more than all of this to be expected of an education in Harvard College.

At a crucial point in its argument the "red book" says, "It is impossible to escape the realization that our society rests on common beliefs and that a major task of education is to perpetuate them." Unfortunately, it does not adequately define these beliefs, but what much undergraduate criticism of Harvard college seems to me quite properly to be saying is that it is not enough simply to know about beliefs—one must also believe these. Some of you have expressed in writing the view that your years in college have been a lackluster period. There have been many commentators outside at work helping to foster the notion. Certainly, the mass excitement experienced in periods of war and depression has been lacking. But this—fortunately (it is to be hoped)—is not what is meant. It is rather the absence of identified and valued goals which provoke energetic forward thrust in individuals.

It seems to me, too, that such a deficiency has existed during these years—though not only during these years. On the other hand, if it has, it has not been peculiar to colleges nor confined within them. Much as we who spend our lives in colleges dislike to concede that they are less apt to shape the intellectual conditions of a time than to be shaped by them, in this instance the latter appears clearly to have been the case. To many, not just the colleges, but the whole western world has for some time seemed to be adrift with little sense of purposeful direction, lacking deeply held conviction, wandering along with no more stirring thought in the minds of most men than desire for diversion, personal comfort and safety.

There has been a deficiency of passion and of concern. Barricades have had little appeal. Few have been eager to participate actively in good works. Near the end of your years here the call to picket in behalf of unsegregated lunch counters in the South presented to some of you an opportunity to become activists and thus to escape from the sense that you were not doing what you should. But on the whole, there have been only very faint evidences now and then, of direction and purpose, and, as a consequence, very little desire or effort, inside or outside colleges, to change the world, in recent years the aim of most has been simply to get on in the world as it is. We have preferred to remain quiet and inconspicuous, perhaps to emerge for a moment now and then for a jovial or supercilious sally, but as a rule never to stray very far: from benign detachment.

A deep want of our time is revealed by this state of affairs. It can be put something like this: Purposeful action of the kind whose absence many have long lamented depends first of all upon caring—upon caring passionately. But caring in its turn, to persist and become a creative force, ultimately demands belief and conviction. It is from these that hope, which can alone give energy to caring, derives. This seems to me a truism; and if it is, then it is belief and conviction, not their subsequent manifestations, which are the serious desiderata of our time.

Why is it that so many people now fear to believe anything? This question, the most serious of our day, is not easily answered. Is it because we have suddenly become so much more knowledgeable? I cannot think so. It seems to me rather more likely that the ability to puncture

crude beliefs and deflate cant has become such a common skill in our time that masses of individuals, ever ready-to conform, now adapt.

For a long time, especially those of us most insistent to avow our rationality have been caught up in an attitude of disdain Which has stealthily tended to destroy the sources of our spiritual lives almost without our being aware it was happening. As a consequence, we have been made timid in belief, and so are now frequently afraid to go beyond a "yes, but" attitude. So faint is our confidence in the instincts toward the right which from time to time stir within us that when they come, we can act only with a minimum of conviction. Indeed, it would appear that the false pride of critical acumen and superior insight grips us so firmly that the kind of belief and hope that lead to action have almost no chance to grow within us.

Somewhere here, I think, the authors of "Harvard 1956" had a point. There can be something desiccating about an intellectual life that has become excessively cerebral, critical, abstract, and detached, it used to be taken for granted that at least youth was always ardent and enthusiastic. But why now do some youth wish to withdraw from the shared world, revolted by it, while the majority of the others are quick to imitate the more timid and conventional among their elders? Can it be that youth has been made prematurely old by being caught early in the new manner? Why, more seriously, going back another step, are there so few of a more admirably energetic kind among their elders to imitate—courageous, convinced and informed people ready to work and spend their lives in large causes? Is this not at least in part because we have all become so captivated by and so adept at destructive criticism, and so frightened at the prospect of having to stand alone before it, that workout of spiritual energy in pure nature which both promote and in turn gain strength from unselfish actions, tend to stifle stillborn within us?

If this analysis has anything in it, it follows we are up against a disease not easily cured. The falling off in conviction and in Will in the western world in our time is a very general and pervasive affair. We are all victims of it, rather than its active instigators or fomenters. What seems to be lacking, at bottom, is the kind of faith we can only speak of as religious, faith we know we need, and for the most part, wish we had. There are few people in our world who do not want to believe in God as the ground of our being. The atheist is not necessarily a happy person. The tragedy of our time in this matter of belief is not that many in the intellectual-world do not believe in God; it is, rather, that there are many who want to and can't.

And is there a correlation here between the lack of tinder-girding faith in God and the lack of leadership today so widely noted? We have heard much about lack of leadership in recent months and will undoubtedly hear much more about it in the months immediately ahead. Insofar as this is self-regarding talk for the sake of political advantage it is not a serious matter. But insofar as it is an accurate observation concerning an almost universal failing of our time, it is a matter of grave and foreboding concern.

The thoughtful public with reason looks to the colleges for leadership, to people like yourselves. Surely the select individuals with the coveted advantage of educational experience in the stronger colleges should be a chief source of future leaders in every important field of human activity. But who can lead, who will lead, if he does not believe deeply and care deeply, and is thus prepared, through faith, to act with purpose and with hope? And yet in our colleges we have no, and can have no courses in belief.

It is at this point that we come upon what I consider can be a serious failure in a Harvard education. It is not that you will not know enough? Nor that you will have failed to gain sufficient intellectual acumen from attending Harvard. It is rather that at the end of your experience here you may believe too faintly and care less.

There is a very serious significance in the recurrent sense of lack felt again and again by undergraduates as they come to the close of their experience of Harvard. I do not know who or what is to blame. But, all of us know that bright, well-trained people living in critical detachment without lively concern or involvement cannot meet the needs which are now so gapingly evident — neither the personal needs confronting each of us, nor the pressing social, political and other needs of our world. What we desperately want is a great new stirring of conviction. Our enormous need is to be able to act promptly and generously from a sense of potential in life and of concern for others. Toward this end we need leaders to kindle and focus in us constructive purpose, leaders motivated by deep awareness, activated by lively sympathy and profound conviction who have found the trust and hope which will call them to act and, acting, quicken concern in others and provoke them to endeavor.

It is at this point above all that I pray your experience here will have served you well. Harvard cannot give anyone religious faith, but surely it should not prevent its attainment. Wherefore it is my prayer, in this traditional service of worship in which we come together today, at the end of your careers in Harvard college, that you gentlemen of the class of 1960, who brought so much promise when you came, will have found in Harvard the antithesis of indifference, disillusionment, cynicism, and disdain. This community abounds in deep concern, profound belief and quiet religious faith despite some appearances and many reports to the contrary. It will be a great loss for you and for society if you have not found it so, if it has not conveyed to you its basic conviction.

In most of Harvard's inhabitants, underneath the placidity of traditional understatement and lack of display, there is a greater attachment to height and depth than to breadth in our culture, and, when pressed to this final point of admission, passionate concern to serve God rather than men. And from this grows a pulsating determination to set shortcomings right.

Harvard has wanted to speak to you of things of this kind. It has ever been Harvard's most profound hope, springing from her initial deep religious faith, that those who come here will be drawn to teachers and situations which reveal the richest, the deepest, and the noblest potentials

in the human condition. Firmly established originally by men instant to serve God, Harvard has continued to believe that true intellectuals are God's servants and has moved ahead in her task confident that as we become oriented toward and involved with such people, their interests, their achievements, and their beliefs, there may come to us moments of insight to guide us finally to a religious stance, and from this to joyous involvement.

The authors of "Harvard 1956" began their attack on the College by saying, editorially, "We have lived in Cambridge for four years, and we care about it." Then they went on to say, "Somehow one has to care about the place one lives in." Indeed, I am convinced the violence of their attack was only the reflection of the depth of their concern. I hope you care about this place for valid reasons. I hope you have come to understand that what it represents at its best lies a considerable distance beyond arid intellectualism or narrow professionalism, despite the many times these have been said to represent our upper limits, I hope also that during your years here you have become aware of the deep spiritual ground on which rest Harvard's best values—her devotion to truth coupled with concern for others. It is easy to miss this point. I pray finally, most earnestly, that such faith in God as has been given to you has not been hurt, but has been helped by your experience at Harvard, and that hereafter, returning and growing, it will sustain in you both the will and the expectancy to try to wake something of your lives, it is finally for a belief of this kind that you came to Harvard, whatever you may have thought, and however high your test scores. Now you leave us for new adventure. Harvard hopes she has helped you—deeply—for what lies ahead.